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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000745

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UAE FOREIGN MINISTER ON IRAQ ISSUES

REF: A) ABU DHABI 711 (FRIENDS OF IRAQ CONFERENCE SCENESETTER)
B) NEW DELHI 1606 (AMBASSADORIAL CANDIDATE)
C) BAGHDAD 1760 (ZEBARI ON ARAB EMBASSIES)
D) BAGHDAD 1734 (FM ABDULLAH IN BAGHDAD)

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: On the margins of the Friends of Iraq Conference held in Abu Dhabi, Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus discussed potential UAE contributions to Iraq with Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed (AbZ) June 19, and used a subsequent lunch conversation with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), which AbZ also attended, to reinforce key messages of the conference. AbZ hoped for rapid coordination of an al-Maliki visit to the UAE, but sensed lingering coordination snags in the GoI. He said a UAE ambassador could be on the ground within days of GoI acceptance of agreement, which the UAE had already requested. Stating the UAE's support for the Friends of Iraq dialogue, AbZ said his government was still out in front of the GCC in terms of reopening an embassy. Riyadh remained particularly skeptical of Iran's influence in Baghdad. AbZ was supportive of the SoFA and Strategic Framework talks. Asking what the UAE might do to encourage greater Arab engagement, AbZ tossed out the idea of linking Abu Mazen with the GoI to boost Iraq's Arab credentials. Deeper ties face a "chicken and egg" dilemma, however, with better GoI treatment of Palestinian refugees needed to boost Palestinian interest in engagement -- while such engagement is needed to convince Iraq to assist the Palestinian refugee community. End summary.

¶2. (C) AbZ began by thanking the USG for helping host him in Baghdad June 5, and noting that subsequent discussions of dates for PM al-Maliki to visit the UAE were moving slowly. A proposal of June 16 had failed due to travel of the UAE Prime Minister Mohammed bin Rashid, and al-Maliki was unable to travel on June 23-25, the second proposal. Dates now in play are July 6-8, said AbZ, but are pending final word of President Khalifa's summer travel plans of (which AbZ said should be finalized soon). AbZ wanted the visit to take place when the UAE President and Prime Minister were both available. (In a brief aside about coordination snags, AbZ lamented PM al-Maliki's failure to delegate the arrangement of diplomatic visits to FM Zebari. AbZ also chided al-Maliki for removing his tie when he visited Khamenei -- as if to dress more like his hosts in sympathy for their views; if he visited a synagogue "would he wear a yarmulke" and how would he dress for the Pope?) In a subsequent lunch conversation, MbZ said he had spoken personally with al-Maliki and encouraged him to visit. MbZ's International Affairs Director whispered to PolOff that the UAE has "reached out every way we can" and hopes for a more proactive GoI response.

¶3. (C) AbZ said the UAEG had requested agreement for its current Ambassador to India (ref B offers background on Ambassador Abdulla Ebrahim Alzoy Al Shehhi) as the UAE's envoy to Baghdad. The envoy could be at post a "couple of days" after Iraq approves, he added, and would likely begin his tenure in the Al Rashid hotel while awaiting preparation of the Embassy building. The nominee has a 20-year military career and has been in diplomatic service for six years; he was chosen, according to AbZ, for this unique mix of military and diplomatic experience.

14. (C) AbZ said the UAE was glad to have the Friends of Iraq Conference (an "important meeting," in his words) in Abu Dhabi. Crocker noted that the conference comes at an important time in Iraq's reintegration into the international community, stressing that AbZ's visit to Baghdad was similarly timely, sent a powerful signal, and "set the tone" for a productive conference. He emphasized broad participation in the conference, and a wide range of economic and development topics, as breaking new ground in expanding international interest in Iraq. Crocker stressed that Iraq's Arab identity was vitally important at this critical juncture, making al-Maliki's engagement with the region important. The GoI needs relations with Iran, but al-Maliki also looks to balance those ties with Arab relationships.

15. (C) Noting that GCC foreign ministers had welcomed his visit to Iraq when they subsequently gathered in Jeddah, AbZ said Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar refused to cite the reopening of embassies as a priority in their communique. The Saudis, in particular, seemed to rely on dubious information about political happenings in Iraq, agreed AbZ and his guests (such as allegations of vast numbers of Iranians sent to vote in Iraqi elections). AbZ said the Saudis had raised the idea of a language test to determine the "native Iraqi" credentials of voters; some Iraqi exiles in Iran no doubt do participate in elections, which may contribute to Saudi misperceptions. In any case, all agreed that much mistrust must still be overcome between the two neighbors.

16. (C) In a subsequent aside, AbZ expressed concern over Saudi Arabia, noting that while King Abdullah may have good intentions in standing against radical Islam, at age 86, he was not an agent for change. He did not see much promise among the younger princes,

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asserting that the Saudi system insured that any who rose to prominence would be corrupt and beholden to the clerics. He and MbZ were similarly downbeat on Kuwait, noting the rise of Islamic influence there. They both emphasized their focus on keeping Islamism out of the Emirates, particularly its school system.

17. (C) Asked whether the positive dynamic of recent "GCC plus" events in Bahrain might be replicated, and take up issues of defense and security, AbZ said Riyadh would be particularly reluctant to endorse such a dialogue. Just as the U.S. desire for a security dialogue with the Gulf states made little progress on the multilateral track -- but thrived bilaterally -- neither a GCC nor a "GCC plus" configuration was likely to move quickly on Iraqi security engagement.

18. (C) AbZ was encouraged to hear reports of progress on the Strategic Framework and SoFA talks, as Ambassador Crocker noted that al-Maliki and other senior GoI officials were increasingly resisting Iranian objections. Asked how the discussion was viewed in the GCC, AbZ said the framework was seen by many as a natural goal demonstrating the long term U.S. commitment to Iraq beyond the Chapter VII deadline. The results should be good for Iraq and for the region, as Iraq's security will benefit. The negotiations may also benefit from the harsh comments of their detractors -- Iranian and Hizballah officials; Crocker noted that Shi'a, Sunni and Kurdish leaders were criticizing those critics and seeking a dignified Iraqi solution. (Comment: AbZ subsequently offered his opinion to Crocker that it would be better to hold off a resumption of US-Iranian talks until after the conclusion of SFA/SOFA agreements lest the Iranians seek to insert themselves in the negotiations.) The GoI is increasingly focused on sovereignty and dignity since successful security operations in Basrah, he added. Iraqis are sensitive to outsiders telling them how to run their affairs. General Petraeus cited growing animosity for the special groups conducting terrorist operations, such as the Baghdad car bombing two days prior. Iranian support for such groups will hopefully continue to backfire. (Note: In closing the Friends of Iraq conference later that day, National Security Advisor Mowaffak al-Rubbaie recalled Iraq's rich history to note that Iraq had literally invented the wheel, to which Crocker reminded listeners that Iraqis are tired of being told how to reinvent it. The future will be determined by what Iraqis see as important for Iraq to achieve in its own way. End note.)

¶9. (S) Jordanian and Bahraini statements about reopening embassies in Baghdad are also encouraging, agreed both parties, and should send a powerful signal to others. AbZ asked what the UAE might do to encourage the GCC and Egypt to engage with al-Maliki more effectively. When Crocker stressed that AbZ is a good judge of such opportunities, which he should take advantage of when he sees them, AbZ offered an idea: "What if we can convince Abu Mazen to have an Ambassador in Iraq?" The GoI could help the Palestinian Authority make such a move by dealing properly with Palestinian refugees in Iraq -- failure to do so jeopardizes improved relations, said AbZ, citing "inhumane" treatment of Palestinians. Even with a will on both sides to engage more closely, practical coordination between the PA and GoI easily gets caught up on the perceived failure of the other side to take action. Demonstrated support for the Palestinian Authority could strengthen Iraq's position in the Arab world, emphasized AbZ, but Abu Mazen could be weakened if he engaged aggressively without a resolution to refugee concerns. Abu Mazen, for his part, hates asking for things (particularly money), said AbZ, so he is not persistent to press for what he needs.

¶10. (S) Over lunch, MbZ said that July 6-7 would be good dates for a Maliki visit. President Khalifa had agreed to postpone his vacation in order to receive the PM. AbZ commented that the UAE wanted to manage its relationships with Iraq through Foreign Minister Zebari, and noted that his visit to Baghdad was motivated in part by the desire to bolster Zebari's stature. For the same reason, the UAE leadership had declined meetings with NSA Mowaffak al-Rubbaie who was in Abu Dhabi for the FOI conference. (Crocker subsequently called Zebari in Washington who confirmed he was in touch with AbZ and said he thought the July dates would work. He said Iraq had just received an agreement request for a new Jordanian ambassador, but was unaware of the UAE request. He said he would check with his ministry and contact AbZ.)

¶11. (U) This cable has been cleared by Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus.

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